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The Glory of Sanchi

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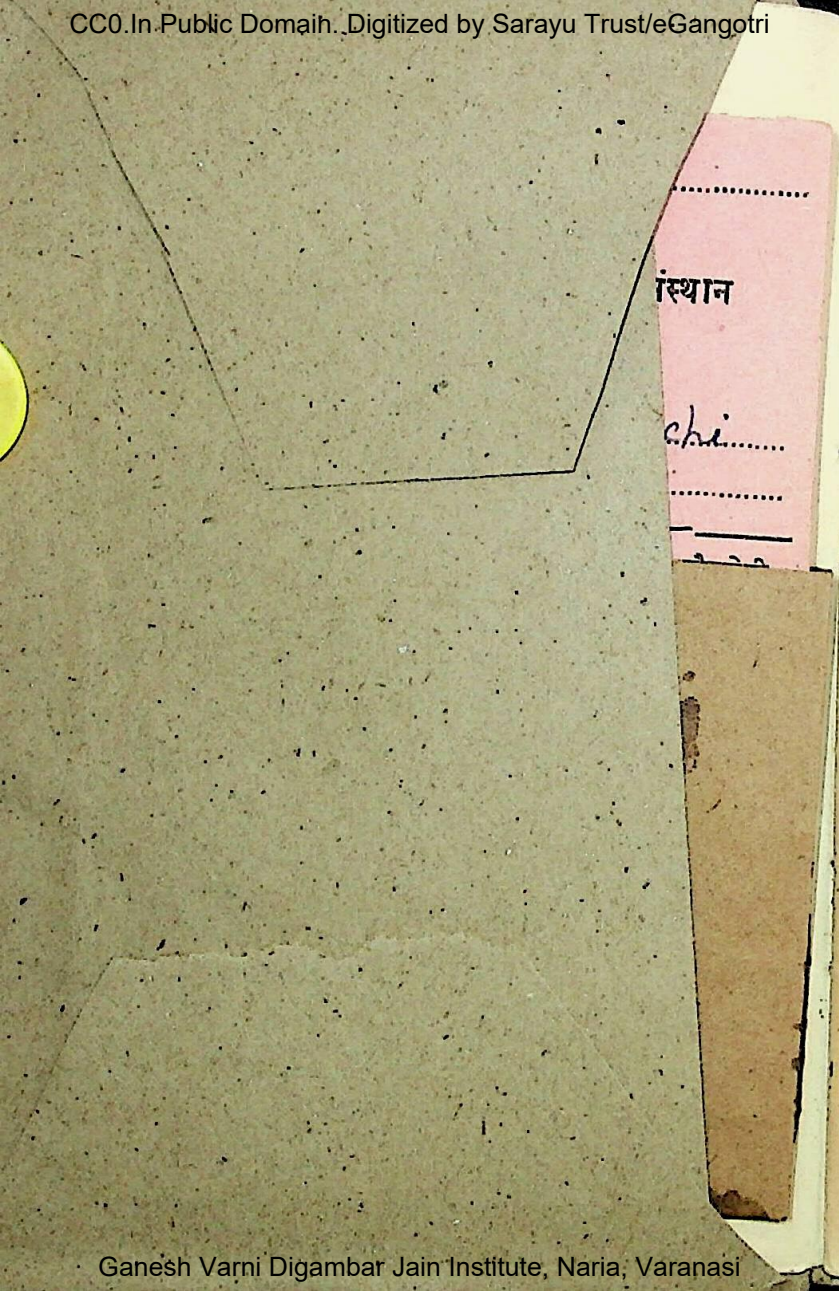

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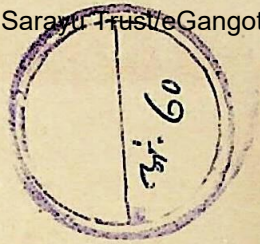

The Glory of
SANCHI

Commentary by
Sri N. Y. SASTRY
Custodian of Ancient Monuments (Retired)
Government of India

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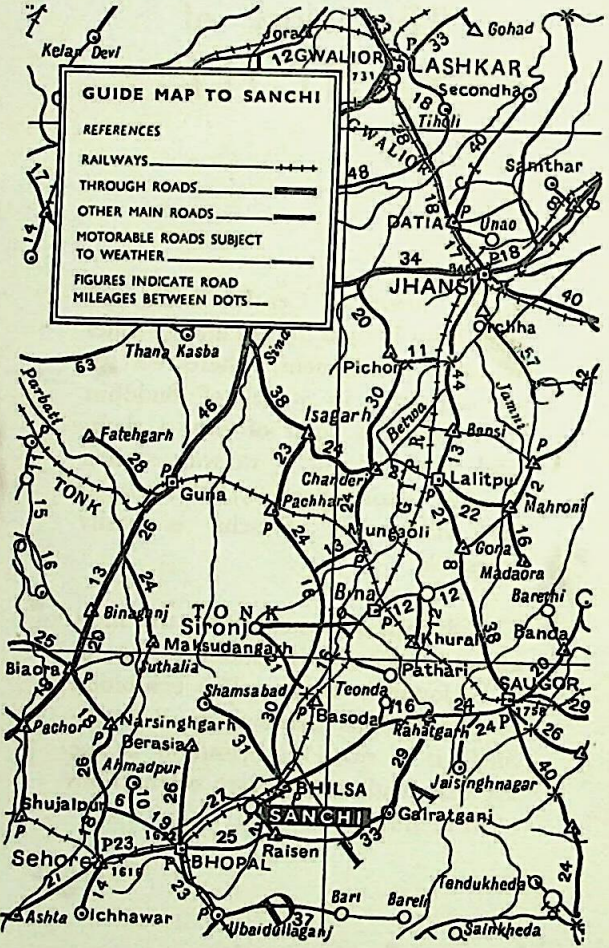

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The Glory of SANCHI

In the heart of Central India, 28 miles from Bhopal by rail and 42 miles by road, lies Sanchi, where we see a 'panorama in stone' of Buddhist art covering a span of over a thousand years. Being a railway station on the main Bombay/Delhi route, the village of Sanchi is easily accessible.

The shrines of Sanchi form the most ancient and extensive Buddhist remains to be found in India. This exhibition of photographs planned by Burmah-Shell is a small contribution to the 2,500th death anniversary celebrations of Lord Buddha.

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1 THE GREAT STUPA

In the interior of this structure lies a smaller brick Stupa built by Asoka in the 3rd century B.C. This brick Stupa was encased in stone and plaster in the 2nd century B.C., and girdled by the upper and lower stone railings. The four ornamental Gateways were added during the 1st century B.C.

As it now stands, the Stupa is 54 feet high and measures 120 feet across the base.

---

2 NORTHERN GATEWAY
EASTERN END—FRONT

The female bracket figures flanking the Elephant Capital are Yakshinis, originally the spirit of the trees recruited to Buddhism as Protectors of the Gateways. These figures could be interpreted as symbols of the world of illusions in contrast to the reality of the Stupa.

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NORTHERN GATEWAY **3**
WESTERN END — LOWER CROSS-BAR
—FRONT

The sculpture represents the Ekasringa Jataka or the Story of the Buddha in a previous incarnation as a Brahmin, with whom a doe fell in love and gave birth to a one-horned son. The boy is seen saluting the father while the mother looks on.

NORTHERN GATEWAY **4**
FRONT VIEW — TOP

The upper cross-bar reveals the seven previous Buddhas symbolised as Stupas and trees with seats.

The centre cross-bar portrays the same Buddhas as the trees under which they obtained enlightenment.

The lower cross-bar shows the Vishwantara Jataka or the story of the Buddha who as Prince Vessanthra gave gifts so lavishly that he was expelled from the kingdom. The Prince is shown departing in a carriage which he later gave away and entered the forest.

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5 **NORTHERN GATEWAY**
FRONT OF NORTHERN GATEWAY

A general study of the Northern Gateway which is the best preserved of the series. The circular ends of the cross-bars reveal its evolution from a wooden prototype.

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6 **NORTHERN GATEWAY**
REVERSE OF NORTHERN GATEWAY

The central cross-bar is particularly interesting. It figures the King of the Maras (the evil spirits who tempted Buddha) seated on an elevated platform greatly concerned over the rising power of the Buddha. To the King's left are his jovial camp followers singing and dancing quite unconcerned about the situation.

The lower cross-bar portrays further episodes of Vishwantara Jataka. Starting from the right, the Prince is seen lighting a fire, conversing with his wife, giving a gift of his children and finally giving away his wife. The anecdote is proved an illusion through the intervention of Indra, the Chief of the Gods and the family is united.

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NORTHERN GATEWAY **7/8**

Two different views of the reverse of the Northern Gateway.

NORTHERN GATEWAY **9**
REVERSE WESTERN END

The die — square block between the cross - bars — depicts an expressive figure of Gajalakshmi (or Queen Maya) mother of Gautama Buddha, seated on a lotus.

NORTHERN GATEWAY — REVERSE **10**

Another view of the Gateway.

NORTHERN GATEWAY **11**
INNER FACE OF WESTERN PILLAR

The two women worshipping the Buddha are probably the donors of this sculpture. The monument was built through the contribution of such devotees. The whole-hearted devotion of the infant in prayer is noteworthy.

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12 **NORTHERN GATEWAY**
WESTERN PILLAR

The scene represents a monkey offering honey to the Buddha. Symbolically, it means that the Great One gave his message for the benefit of all creatures.

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13 **NORTHERN GATEWAY — REVERSE**

The details of the right end of the Gateway.

14/15/16 **NORTHERN GATEWAY — REVERSE**

Further details of the reverse of the Northern Gateway.

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17 **EASTERN GATEWAY — FRONT**

The Eastern Gateway is seen in relation to a portion of the Stupa. The Northern Gateway appears to the right.

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18 **EASTERN GATEWAY — FRONT**

The Eastern Gateway with the full Stupa in the background.

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EASTERN GATEWAY 19
FRONT MIDDLE SECTION

If the Northern Gateway is the best preserved, the Eastern Gateway is probably the most interesting. The lower cross-bar for instance shows in the centre the wooden temple of Buddha Gaya as Asoka originally built it. To its left is the Emperor himself stepping down from his elephant. This is the earliest representation of the King.

The middle cross-bar shows the final departure of Gautama from the palace, and the progression and return of his horse Kanthaka.

EASTERN GATEWAY 20
FLANKING THE NORTHERN PILLAR

The bracket figure flanking the Elephant Capital is a Yakshini. It is a fine specimen of the art of the period.

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21 **EASTERN GATEWAY**
FLANKING THE NORTHERN PILLAR

The rear view of the Yakshini is perhaps even more beautiful than the front with the spine dexterously suggested by a depression and the tresses flowing like a mountain cataract.

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22 **EASTERN GATEWAY**
FRONT TOP

Another view of the Eastern Gateway.

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23 **EASTERN GATEWAY**
FRONT

Starting from the bottom of the Pillar are shown the six lower heavens of the Buddhists. The upper two represent the heaven of those who take pleasure in their own work and the heaven of those who take pleasure in other people's work.

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EASTERN GATEWAY **24**
INNER FACE OF NORTHERN PILLAR

Queen Maya is shown asleep in a wooden palace dreaming of a white elephant symbolising the immaculate conception. A procession is seen emerging from the palace.

EASTERN GATEWAY **25**
STATUE OF BUDDHA

This Buddha behind the Eastern Gateway is the finest in Sanchi and may be attributed to the 5th century A.D. With a large halo and two flying angels, it is reminiscent of the Sarnath Buddha though the smile is less pronounced.

EASTERN GATEWAY **26/27**
NORTHERN PILLAR

Further views of a scene in the Northern Pillar inner face. Particularly noteworthy is the sculpture of the heads of the two horses which as an animal study, is unsurpassed in ancient art.

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28 **SOUTHERN GATEWAY**
FRONT TOP

When Sanchi was first discovered, this Gateway was found fallen. In setting it up, the upper and the lower cross-bars were reversed by mistake. Hence the floral decorations instead of Buddhist stories appear in front.

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29 **SOUTHERN GATEWAY**
REVERSE

Details of the rear portion of the Southern Gateway.

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30 **WESTERN GATEWAY**
FRONT

A general view of the Western Gateway. The unsculptured portion is a modern renovation.

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WESTERN GATEWAY
FRONT **31**

It shows the Keechakas or citizens of the underworld uplifting the superstructure. Starting from the left, the expressions of strain and peace are seen on the left pillar while those of laughter and sorrow are shown on the other pillar. Strain, peace, laughter, sorrow and lethargy depicted in another Gateway, seem to be the five fundamental ways of doing any type of work.

WESTERN GATEWAY
REVERSE DETAIL **32/33**

A general view of the rear of the Western Gateway. The Keechakas are shown in various moods.

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34 **WESTERN GATEWAY**
REVERSE

The upper cross-bar depicts the Mallas of Nepal moving in a procession for the dedication of the relics of the Buddha. The figures on the middle cross-bar represent armies of seven kings going on a march to wrest a share of the relics. The lower cross-bar illustrates, on the right end, the rout of the Maras, with the Gods coming in procession from the other end.

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35 to 40 **WESTERN GATEWAY**
CAPITAL FIGURES

The Keechakas — citizens of the underworld — in diverse moods.

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STUPA NO. 3 **41/42**

Except for a few sculptured pieces here and there, the Stupa is a modern construction over the ruins of a similar Stupa of the 2nd century B.C. containing the relics of Sariputta and Mogallana, the chief disciples of Buddha. The Gateway is however old and may be ascribed to the earlier part of the 1st century A.D.

GATEWAY NO. 5 REVERSE **43**

Closer view of the rear portion of the 5th Gateway.

GUPTA PILLAR WITH FOUR LIONS **44**

Though frequently mistaken for a Pillar of Asoka, it is at least 600 years later. The base of the Gupta Pillar is square and it does not have the polish, characteristic of the Asokan Pillar. An inscription places the date of the Gupta Pillar beyond doubt.

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45 **TEMPLE NO. 18**

A rectangular temple with a rounded end (apsidal) with characteristic pillars of the 7th century A.D. The temple however had its origin in the 3rd century B.C.

46/47 **NORTHERN GATEWAY**
OUTER FACE OF LEFT PILLAR

The scene represents an attempt of an artist to portray the Buddha. The Buddha's feet are shown at the bottom while an umbrella is carved on top to indicate the head. The body is to be presumed in between. The nine pairs of garlands are shown to indicate the powers which the Buddha had (Navasampatti).

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EASTERN GATEWAY **48**
RIGHT PILLAR, INNER FACE,
SECOND PANEL

Another view of the inner face of a pillar of the Eastern Gateway, Northern Pillar. At the bottom is shown the pathway of the Buddha, who walked in air preaching the Dharma, while his father gazes at him in wonder.

SOUTHERN GATEWAY **49**
WESTERN PILLAR, INNER FACE,
BOTTOM PANEL

The Devas are shown worshipping the hair and head-gear of the Buddha after he discarded them on leaving the palace. An inscription on the top states that the carving was done by the ivory workers of Vidisa.

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50 **NORTHERN GATEWAY FRONT, WESTERN PILLAR, TOP PANEL**

The descent of the Buddha from the heaven of the 33 Gods, after he had preached there to his mother, Maya. The tree on the top and throne symbolise the Holy One before his descent, while the bottom tree and throne, after he had set foot on earth. The Buddha descended by the ladder shown in the centre and was attended by adoring Devas.

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51 **GATEWAY NO. 5, WESTERN END, BOTTOM**

A beautiful sculpture of the Naga King and Queen seated on the folds of a five-hooded snake. Mandakini, the river of heaven, is shown in front.

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WESTERN GATEWAY **52**
FRONT, SOUTHERN PILLAR,
TOP PANEL

The scene illustrates the Mahakapi Jataka or the story of the Buddha who was a monkey in a previous incarnation. Legend records that the Bodhisattva dwelt with his troupe on a mango tree near Banaras. They lived on the fruits of the great tree. King Brahmadatta of Banaras, who desired the mangoes for himself, surrounded the tree with his soldiers in order to kill the monkeys. But the whole tribe escaped by using the body of the Bodhisattva as a bridge. In the process, the master was fatally injured and in that condition he preached a sermon to the penitent king on the duties of a raja (Raja Dharma).

EASTERN GATEWAY **53**
FRONT, NORTHERN PILLAR, BOTTOM

The pensive youth, Lokapala or the guardian of the four cardinal points of the universe, sitting with a meditative band.

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54 **FRONT OF EASTERN GATEWAY— SOUTHERN PILLAR**

The story goes that the Buddha was camping on the banks of the Nairanjana river when there was a flood. A rescue party headed by Kashyapa, a sceptic, came in a boat to save Buddha's life. In the meantime, the Buddha proved his greatness by walking across the waters and Kashyapa worshipped him. The Buddha is shown as a tree with a seat and the path over the water is marked.

The waves and the aquatic flora and fauna are carved with great skill and patience. The worshippers are clad in reeds and bark of trees as becoming of Vanaprasthas or forest dwellers.

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55 **NORTHERN GATEWAY, FRONT, EASTERN PILLAR**

A repetition of the lower order of the Buddhist heaven where pleasure and passions held sway. The character in the top right hand corner is holding an old-fashioned veena resembling a Greek harp.

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Though India is not a Buddhist country the philosophy of Buddhism is deeply embedded in the thoughts and character of the people. The noble eight-fold path to Nirvana as preached by the Buddha, is as follows :

1. SAMMADITTHI Right Understanding 2. SAMMASANKAPPO Right Mindedness	I Enlightenment
3. SAMMAVACA Right Speech 4. SAMMAKAMMANTO Right Action 5. SAMMA-AJIVO Right Living	II Morality
6. SAMMAVAYAMO Right Effort 7. SAMMASATI Right Attentiveness 8. SAMMASAMADHI Right Concentration	III Concentration

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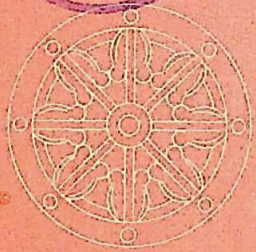

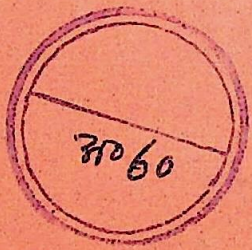

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